

Bridging Continents: Exploring Cultural Dynamics in a COIL Experience

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to share the design, planning, and results of a COIL (Collaborative International Online Learning) experience that took place in the 2023-24 academic year, between two universities from different continents. This activity offered students the opportunity to work virtually to promote academic exchange, social growth, motivation and the development of competences necessary to face multicultural environments in their professional future. The methodology applied is qualitative in nature, as it describes the process of the COIL activity. In terms of results and implications, the activity highlighted the cultural differences between the participants and their capacity to manage and adapt, where 100% of the participants responded at the end of the activity that they had acquired communication skills, it has highlighted the cultural differences between the participants and their capacity to manage and adapt.

Keywords: *Intercultural competences; COIL; International experience.*

1. Introduction

In the changing landscape of global education, universities around the world have adopted internationalization and cultural exchange as key objectives given their importance of cultivating global skills and competences among their students (Gray et al., 2021). This transformation plays an important role for students to understand and appreciate diverse perspectives, enabling them to interact effectively across cultures and contribute to collective well-being (OECD, 2018).

Similarly, in the globalized business field, companies have also increased their interconnectedness. As businesses seek professionals with intercultural competences to face multicultural environments, they turn to universities not only for specific knowledge but also for enhancing skills beyond traditional hard skills. However, developing them within a lecture-

centric environment poses challenges. To address this, universities are adapting their curricula by introducing student-centered innovations, classroom challenges, and hands-on experiences (Bozdağ, 2018).

The Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) methodology, pioneered by the State University of New York's (SUNY) COIL Center, aims to fostering intercultural and international competences in higher education. This methodology offers various benefits, including the incorporation of new methodologies, technologies, and content into curricula, as well as the creation of academic and professional networks (Sercu, 2023). According to Knight (2017), COIL contributes to educational innovation by promoting the use of other languages, developing communication skills, facilitating collaborative and interdisciplinary work, and fostering the exchange of thoughts, knowledge, and cultures while respecting diversity. Thus, the COIL experience encompasses three core components: collaboration, internationalization, and online interaction. A typical COIL program spans four weeks to an entire semester, involving the formation of diverse teams comprising students from different institutions (Shoji and Okura, 2024).. These teams collaborate online, addressing group assignments while actively incorporating intercultural learning components. Educators must guide and foster intercultural collaboration along the activity (Hackett et al., 2023).

Considering this backdrop, this study presents the design, planning, and outcomes of a COIL activity implemented in a Spanish university (SP) within the subject of Project Management in the Master's Degree in Business Administration and Production Systems (MIMO) together with a South American (SA) university in the subject of Project Development and Control, part of the specialization in Project Planning, Development, and Management during the academic year 2023/24.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Design

Due to the complexity given by intercultural competences, a mixed method approach was assessed to collect data (Deardorff, 2011). In addition, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods have been argued to be advantageous as they cancel out each other's weaknesses and result in superior research (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2016). Thus, qualitative data was collected through focus group interviews and written student reflection reports; and quantitative data was collected through surveys answered by the participants before and after the course.

2.2. Participants

This study involved a sample of 52 undergraduate students, composed of 31 students from the Spanish university (SP) and 21 students from the South American university (SA). All students from the SP university were engineers, while of the 21 students at the university in SA, 19 were from different professions, and the rest, were also engineers, reflecting the interprofessional nature of the study (IPEC, 2023). This way of working allows each professional to contribute their specific knowledge and skills to achieve a common goal. The age distribution ranged from 21 to 54 years, with the majority falling between 21 and 29 years old. In terms of gender, there were 34 female and 18 male participants. Details on students and demographic data can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Students and demographic data

Group	Variable	N (52)
Participant's occupation	Social Communication	5
	Administrator	3
	Engineer	33
	Bachelor of Education	2
	Architect	1
	Fiscal Sciences	2
	Accountant	1
	Economist	1
	International Studies	1
	Bachelor of Physiotherapy	1
	Bachelor of Nutrition and Dietetics	1
Bachelor of Social Work	1	
Age range	Between 21 and 29	43
	Between 30 and 39	4
	Between 40 and 54	5
Gender	Female	34
	Male	18
University of study	UIC	31
	UMA	21

2.3. Collaborative Learning Assignment and COIL Intervention

This project aimed to ensure the success of a project by considering various environmental variables, with a focus on competitors, stakeholders, and government regulations. The learning objectives included assessing the impact of the situational environment on the business model, analyzing different areas of the project, and understanding how these factors affect the estimated cost structure. Additionally, recommendations were made to maintain and enhance investor interest.

The methodology consisted of diagnosing intercultural competencies, presenting and socializing students, developing learning objectives and deliverables based on project-based learning, evaluating learning activities, and assessing intercultural competences. The professors at both universities held preliminary meetings for six months starting in May 2023 to establish essential requirements and activities.

The COIL Unit was designed based on Gibbons and Laspra's suggestions, incorporated into the subjects of each university for the academic period 2023-2024, and taught over six weeks from November to December 2023. The professors designed a case study related to the goals of the 2030 Agenda, which was solved by six mixed groups of students from both universities.

The professors jointly prepared the assessment plan, and the final grade assigned was the same for all. However, the value in the assessment plan of the subject in the SP and the SU was 20% and 15%, respectively. The technological tools used for communication were Google Meet, email, WhatsApp, and Classroom. The Unit COIL unfolded across three phases: Pre-COIL, COIL, and Post-COIL.

Pre-COIL (W1): Students completed an anonymous survey assessing prior COIL knowledge, intercultural competences, and expectations. Additionally, they created a short video introducing themselves, defining COIL classrooms, stating expectations, and detailing planned contributions. Teams were formed with a focus on multidisciplinary composition, gender equity, and representation from both countries. Professors presented the COIL activity's objectives, followed by a masterclass and group activities.

COIL:

- Work in progress Week (W2): Students and groups assumed responsibility for working on the case. Constant contact via instant messaging and online meetings was recommended for doubt resolution and case development.
- Checkpoint Week (W3): A synchronous joint session saw students presenting project progress. Groups then worked in secondary classrooms with professor support for more focused efforts.
- Submission Week (W4): The final phase involved students preparing a document, presentation, and video with proposed solutions asynchronously. Timely document delivery was emphasized.

Post-COIL: Feedback, reflection, and dissemination week (W5): the professors evaluate the delivered material and provide comments to each group of students during the feedback session. Besides, students also provide feedback and reflections about the activities. The activity concluded with students participating in a final anonymous survey to gauge satisfaction and record their reflection on their intercultural experiences, also sharing their experiences through social media posts.

3. Results

3.1. Quantitative data

We statistically compared the survey results. 52 (100%) students filled in the pre-survey, and 40 (75.5%) students filled in the post-survey; 12 students who did not complete the survey due to personal circumstances.

3.1.1. Development of cultural competence

Intercultural competence is defined as the ability to interact effectively with people from different cultures, and to understand and appreciate their perspectives, values and behaviours (Deardorff, 2006), and encompasses skills such as effective communication in intercultural contexts, cultural sensitivity, flexibility and adaptability to work in diverse environments, and critical awareness of one's own cultural attitudes and biases.

In terms of intercultural competence, the development of greater intercultural sensitivity is emphasised, highlighting awareness of and adaptation to cultural differences in interactions. Although participants were already aware, the activity reinforced the idea that, despite differences, it is possible to work together and adapt to new situations or working methods.

In the sphere of cultural awareness, there is less needed to wait before forming an impression of culturally different people. The activity has emphasized the importance of listening and understanding before judging, promoting greater tolerance, and understanding.

In relation to situations involving culturally different people, the activity has generated a significant change and confidence in the ability to socialize with natives of other cultures has remained, but there is now recognition of the complexity that can arise in work contexts.

Regarding the adaptability of verbal and non-verbal behavior, the ability to change according to the needs of the situation has been demonstrated. Experience has shown that, despite difficulties, participants can adapt their behavior, all of the above shows the development of cultural competence in the participants.

3.1.2. Developing and strengthening soft skills

Collaborative and teamwork has contributed positively to the development and strengthening of soft skills; specifically in communication skills, there is a decrease in the need to constantly search for what to say when interacting with people from other cultures. Furthermore, the activity has allowed greater fluidity in communication, with the use of fewer pauses, indicating greater rapport and joint work.

Open-mindedness toward people from other cultures has been tempered by the realization that working with them can present challenges, especially in evaluative and pressured environments.

This recognition has led to the development of skills such as negotiation, mutual respect and listening skills, essential for effective collaborative work.

In this way, the activity has contributed to the development of negotiation skills, respect for others and listening skills, especially in contexts where results are expected to be obtained under pressure.

3.2. Qualitative data

The insights gathered from the final reflections provide valuable perspectives on the learning outcomes of the COIL activity, particularly in the realm of communication styles across diverse cultures. Participants recognized the challenge posed by understanding and adapting to different communication styles, emphasizing the need for additional time to synchronize with the pace of work. This consensus among participants led to significant learning experiences and contributing to the improvement of their communication skills (Participants: 7, 13, 23, 34).

The activity described as enjoyable and as a distinctive experience that exposed participants to different perspectives, not only in terms of work methods but also in the project's overall approach. The engagement proved to be an enrichment of knowledge, introducing novel viewpoints to the project that had not been previously considered. Participants acknowledged the opportunity to explore alternative ways of working, and identify potential enhancements, fostering continuous development of the project idea (Participants: 17, 19, 22, 40).

Creativity and innovation with regard to the development of the tasks in collaborative groups was accompanied by: enjoying meeting people and briefly collaborating with students outside the usual classroom environment. I strongly believe that interaction with different perspectives is always enriching and interesting. It was a fun and different experience as it allowed me to have contact with different visions than I am used to, not only because of the way of working, but also because of the style of the project that was worked on. (Participants 17; 37)

Furthermore, the COIL activity served as a spotlight, highlighting cultural differences among participants and their adeptness in managing and adapting to both verbal and non-verbal communication nuances. The experience elevated the level of respect for other cultures and their values, showcasing the participants' heightened awareness and appreciation for the diversity encountered during the collaborative endeavor.

3.3. Student satisfaction with the activity

The assessment of the COIL activity yields valuable insights into the participants' international collaborative experience (see Table 2). With an overall satisfaction rating of 4.05 out of 5, the distinctive qualities of the COIL classroom are positively acknowledged. However, challenges arise in the interaction with students from the other university, scoring an average of 3.28. Language barriers, cultural differences, and technological challenges likely influenced this

perception, exacerbated by the time difference between the universities, emphasizing the need for improved coordination in future collaborations.

On a positive note, the overall usefulness of collaborative work, marked as 4.13, highlights its positive impact on the students' educational experience. This suggests that the COIL approach not only fosters communication skills but also facilitates the practical application of knowledge in real-world scenarios.

A noteworthy aspect is knowledge sharing, scoring an average of 4.25, indicating participants' recognition of the COIL activity's significant contribution to skill and competence development. This underscores the positive impact of international collaboration on academic enrichment, demonstrating the COIL methodology's relevance and effectiveness in providing a holistic and meaningful learning experience that extends beyond theory.

Table 2: Students satisfaction results

Item	Average	SD
Overall satisfaction	4,05	0,59
Interacting with students from another university is easy	3,28	0,87
Collaborative work allowed to develop communication skills	4,00	0,74
Collaborative work has been useful	4,13	0,71
The exchange of knowledge allowed to develop skills and competences	4,25	0,73

4. Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to share the design, planning, and results of a Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) experience. This approach provides a practical way of preparing students for the multicultural environments they may encounter in their future careers. Simultaneously, it contributes to fulfilling the learning objectives of the subjects in which it is used.

The results obtained show that implementing this type of activity not only improves the internationalization and globalization of the university but also helps to develop students' cultural and communication skills. Additionally, it enhances transversal skills such as problem-solving and teamwork, which are increasingly important in an increasingly complex and competitive world. By enhancing these skills, students can better prepare for international collaborations, ensuring effective communication and enriching cultural exchanges. Moreover, it can offer students real-time, actionable insights, enabling them to adapt dynamically within the collaborative environment.

Continuous research into COIL's long-term impacts on participants' careers and competencies will further refine these educational strategies. This alignment will closely align them with

global educational policies and ensure that institutions are preparing a workforce adept at navigating a complex, interconnected world.

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